

# The Mediterranean Garden and the Pacific Northwest

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July 4, 2014



Summertime in the Pacific Northwest. Sunshine, blue skies, gentle breezes. It's almost like being ... on the Mediterranean. And, as it so happens, Mediterranean plants enjoy the climate here. As a bonus for gardeners, many Mediterranean plants are low-maintenance, water wise, and deer-resistant. So, how do you invite a bit of southern Europe into your Pacific Northwest garden?

## The Climate

Here in Skagit County, we have cool, wet winters and warm, dry summers. These are the same climate conditions to be found in countries around the Mediterranean Sea. As long as they don't require intense summer heat, plants that originate in these areas are likely to thrive here.

## Low Maintenance

Mediterranean plants are adapted to seasons when water is scarce. Take crocus, for instance. These spring-blooming bulbs from the Mediterranean enjoy the hot and cold cycle of the seasons. Plant them under deciduous trees where they can put on a spring show before the trees leaf out. Spring rains will give them all the moisture they need to flower, and they will go dormant during the long, dry days of summer. Others, like sea holly (*Eryngium*), have long tap roots to find water deep below the soil surface.

Many use their leaf shape, color and surfaces to manage water. Mediterranean natives that can brighten the perennial border include Jerusalem sage (*Phlomis fruticosa*) and sun roses (*Helianthemum nummularium*), both of which cut down on water loss by having a furry coating on their leaves. The fleshy leaves of alliums—think giant chives with starbursts of lilac flowers-- store water to hedge against drought. Creeping thyme—a good choice to grow between the cracks of patio pavers--has small waxy leaves to retain water on hot summer days.

Many Mediterranean plants are woody shrubs. The silver highlights on the narrow and finely cut leaves of rosemary and artemisia can brighten an outdoor sitting area on summer evenings. The silver coloring reflects sunlight, and the narrow, finely cut leaves reduce surface area for evaporation.

Lavender and lavender cotton (*Santolina chamaecyparissus*) have narrow leaves and also grow in soft mounds to keep the soil around their roots cool and moist. An added advantage for the gardener is that weeds don't grow where mounding shrubs cover the ground. The less time spent out in the gardens beds watering or weeding, the more time that can be spent relaxing on the patio or deck and enjoying the view.



**Stone Benches and vertical accents** bring shades of the rugged Mediterranean countryside and its shimmering heat into your own backyard. *Photo by Jan Billingham/WSU Skagit County Master Gardener.*

### **Deer Resistance**

Many of the characteristics that make Mediterranean plants water wise also make them unpalatable to deer.

Deer love to snack on lush new growth. Mediterranean plants, such as the strawberry tree (*Arbutus unedo*) and the ever-popular lavender, have tough fibrous leaves that deer will eat only if lush leaves are unavailable. And if having fibrous leaves is not enough, some plants also have pungent odors to keep browsers away. So while we may appreciate sun-kissed smell of a summer herb garden, deer prefer to give these fragrant beauties a wide berth.

As an added deterrent, plants such as spurge (*Euphorbia*) contain milky sap that is an irritant on the skin and toxic when ingested, and deer learn to steer clear of them.

### **Wildlife Benefits**

Many Mediterranean plants are evergreen and provide shelter to insects, birds and small critters year round. Some, such as oregano and marjoram, have small flowers that are particularly attractive to bees and butterflies.

Water features are a must in a Mediterranean garden to cool the air in the heat of summer. Butterflies, bees and birds enjoy water features also. A trickle of shallow water and a mister on the hottest days are particularly attractive. You will be rewarded by flashes of color as hummingbirds hover, by the buzz of bees as the pollinators get to work, and by the knowledge that a small army of beneficial insects is toiling away to help keep your garden healthy.

### **Mediterranean Flourishes**

You can choose Mediterranean plants for a low-maintenance, wildlife-friendly garden. Or you can go that extra step to add accents that bring the Mediterranean theme to life.

Clipped evergreen hedges of boxwood or California lilac (*Ceanothus*) paired with white statuary, fountains, and white stone benches evoke the formal gardens of Italy. Vividly colored garden accents such as painted doors or window frames or glass globes conjure up the heat and vibrancy of Spain. Gravel paths meandering through plantings in cool blues and grays evoke the gardens of southern France.

### **Relax**

Most Mediterranean plants prefer well-drained soil and sunlight. Avoid planting them in shady, soggy spots in your garden, and amend your soil or create mounded beds if you have heavy clay. Then sit back and enjoy their delights. Mediterranean plants will help to cut down on your garden chores and to bring some old-world charm into your backyard—and maybe inspire you to make that visit to southern Europe after all.



**LEFT:** California poppies brighten a patch of English lavender. Mediterranean plants attract bees and other beneficial insects to your garden. **CENTER:** Moving water on a stone tower. **RIGHT:** Creeping thyme between pavers creates a Mediterranean feel and releases fragrance when walked on. Photos by Jane Billingham/WSU Skagit County Master Gardener.